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A Prayerful Approach
to living with uncertainty

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A PRAYERFUL APPROACH TO LIVING WITH UNCERTAINTY

(based on Psalm 34)

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Before you begin: This is a five-lesson devotional that is most meaningful when you partner with others to go through it. Individuals can work through the lesson each week and then come together with one or more persons to share as outlined below:

SCRIPTURE

Each day offers a foundational passage from Psalm 34:1-14.

REFLECT

After reading the Scripture and the accompanying devotional, you will find questions to help you personally reflect on what you read.

SHARE

This section offers a key question (or more) that is designed to help small groups engage around the material.

PRACTICE

Each day offers a practice designed to deepen your personal experience of what God is showing you.

LESSON ONE: THE LIFE WE DIDN'T PLAN

SCRIPTURE

I will extol the Lord at all times; his praise will always be on my lips. I will glory in the Lord; let the afflicted hear and rejoice. Glorify the Lord with me; let us exalt his name together. Psalm 34:1-3

INTRODUCTION

Most of us, it seems, don't like uncertainty. In a series of well-documented experiments in which people were given the choice of an immediate electric shock or the possibility of one later, the majority chose the sure thing, even though it meant certain pain. Social scientists created the *Intolerance of Uncertainty Scale* (IUS) to try and assess just how much predictability people need to function in healthy ways. Apparently, a high level of IU contributes to all manner of emotional disorders and depression.¹

If we're learning anything from these past two decades—through tsunamis and earthquakes, hurricanes and mass shootings, market recessions and global pandemics—it is that for any one of us, uncertainty can be the breeding ground for everything from debilitating worry to physical distress to emotional instability and more. Facing a future that seems out of our control tends to leave us with an increasing sense of angst.

CAPTAIN OF THE DISTRESSED

Scriptures show us that David became a master at living with uncertainty as he ran from the rage of King Saul for over a decade. Early on he sought to live close to home in the land of the Philistines, but someone there recognized him and brought him to give account before the king of the area. With his reputation as the giant-killer having preceded him, David realized that this could go terribly wrong. When captured, he pretended to be insane, acting erratically and scratching at the gate as spittle spilled down his face. His ploy worked, and the king released him.

¹ Beck, Julie. How uncertainty fuels anxiety. Atlantic Monthly, March 18, 2015. Accessed at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2015/03/how-uncertainty-fuels-anxiety/388066/>

Soon thereafter his family and others joined him, and the Scriptures tell us he became captain of “every one that was in distress, and every one that was in debt, and every one that was discontented.” (See 1 Samuel 21:13-22:2). That’s quite a people group, but this was the context in which he penned Psalm 34, a powerful proclamation that offers us a spiritual pathway through seasons of uncertainty.

Researchers who have studied *Intolerance of Uncertainty* (IU) and its ensuing consequences note that it seems to be rooted in “a set of negative beliefs about uncertainty and its implications.”² In other words, our inability to deal with a world we can’t control stems from what we believe about uncertainty. To that end, David has much to teach us. He begins this Psalm by connecting with the afflicted folks that look to him for reassurance, reminding them that the starting point in the face of uncertainty, is God, himself.

CONCLUSION

While we may land at different places on the *Intolerance of Uncertainty Scale*, one thing we can be sure of; affirming God’s worth, praising him for who he is and connecting with others who will join us in worship is the perfect place to begin to address our struggle. David introduces this Psalm by inviting each of us to glory in the Lord and exalt his name together.

Reflect

What circumstances in your life make it feel uncertain right now?

Let’s suggest that you have an *Intolerance of Uncertainty Scale* in your hands that goes from one to ten. With a one indicating you can’t handle any unpredictability and a ten indicating you thrive on the adventure of the unknown, what might be your score?

How do you respond to David’s example of addressing the uncertainty he and his family faced with worship and praise? What does this bring up for you?

² Buhr, K.; Dugas, MJ. The role of fear of anxiety and intolerance of uncertainty in worry: an experimental manipulation. *Behavior Research & Therapy*, 2009 Mar; 47(3):215-23.

Share

What negative ideas about uncertainty do you or even the culture around you carry that might be hindering your ability to live peacefully in the face of unpredictability?

Practice

Find three Scriptures that can help you reframe your view of uncertainty. Read them at least three times throughout the day. (Some examples might be Matthew 6:33-34, Psalm 119:5, Proverbs 16:9, Proverbs 3:5-6, Romans 8:28, James 4:13-15)

LESSON TWO: HITTING FEAR HEAD-ON

SCRIPTURE:

I sought the Lord, and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears.
Those who look to him are radiant; their faces are never covered with shame.
Psalm 34:4-5

INTRODUCTION

Did you know that seven common emotions elicit the same facial expressions across cultures, countries and historical eras? This means you could slip into a group of people whose language you've never heard or travel back in time to another country and know whether people are feeling anger, joy, sadness, contempt, fear, surprise or disgust just by looking at their faces.

What does this have to do with our approach to uncertainty? First, it is impossible to hide what is going on inside of us—we seem to be hardwired to show it in our faces. Fear is particularly visible in moments of distress—even children can read it in the way our eyes, nose and mouth align themselves. In times of upheaval, whether we're threatened by unemployment or cancer or the loss of a loved one, fear may be etched on our faces long before our hearts begin to tremble.

FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Uncertainty can be a gift, a blessing in disguise, for it often exposes fears that have lain dormant or anxious thoughts that have hovered beneath the surface affecting us in ways we may not understand. Fear can be debilitating, and until we bring it into the open, we will not experience the freedom we need to go forward with courage.

David hits the issue of fear head-on, telling us that he *sought* the Lord, a word that implies treading the same ground, diligently inquiring until the answer comes. With no pretense of strength or facade of stability, the shepherd boy who would one day become king is habituated to throwing himself on God. Having swum in the sea of uncertainty for months and even years, he knows this is his only recourse. With a relief that is almost palpable, he goes on to declare that God delivered him of not just one, but all his fears.

RADIANT FACES

Seasons of uncertainty remind us that there is no shame in our neediness, no reproach for our struggle. There is a beautiful consequence of seeking God, not from a place of strength, but of raw fear and fragile faith. We look to the

Lord, and our faces, no longer etched with angst, shine with a radiance that brings much needed hope to those still held in the grip of fear.

CONCLUSION

While David wrote this psalm after escaping from the Philistine king, his life was far from stable. There would be many battles yet to fight and enemies to overcome in the days ahead. Still, people flocked to his side in their brokenness, finding faith to persevere by being in his presence. Why? Perhaps uncertainty had become a calling card on David's life, an invitation he couldn't resist to draw near to the God who would deliver him from his fears time and time again.

Reflect

In what ways might uncertainty be a gift in your life? What do you think your face might reflect to others in seasons of uncertainty? What would you like it to reflect?

Share

How do you think the church helps people wrestle with seasons of uncertainty? Is there reproach for those expressing fear? Freedom to sit in the struggle? Why or why not?

Practice

Spend five minutes in silence. Take several deep breaths, slowing down the pace of your body and mind. Imagine God is giving you the gift of uncertainty for this season. As you unwrap the gift, what does it look like? What do you need? What do you fear? End by thanking God in faith for this gift.

LESSON THREE: THE POWER IN NAMING

SCRIPTURE

This poor man called, and the Lord heard him; he saved him out of all his troubles. The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them. Psalm 34:6-7

INTRODUCTION

In the early days of the global pandemic that came to be known as COVID-19, people across the globe were inundated with a steady drumbeat of politicians, pundits, medical experts, social scientists and religious leaders offering sound bites, providing updates and giving advice that changed moment by moment. Uncertainty sprung up like weeds in the garden of our hearts, and many struggled to give voice to what we were feeling. From fear to frustration, from depression to disbelief, from hopelessness to heartache, nameless emotions held us in their grip.

GIVING VOICE TO OUR TROUBLES

Neuroscience is teaching us a lot about our brains and how they respond to the things we say and do. For example, they are learning that verbalizing what we feel and why, brings our minds and hearts together, a process that has the power to disable negative emotions.

In one study, scientists exposed people with the fear of spiders to a loose tarantula, encouraging them to get as close to it as they could, even touching it if possible. After measuring their emotional and physiological responses, they led them into a room with a tarantula in a glass tank. Dividing them into groups, they asked each participant to comment aloud on the situation. One group was instructed to speak confidently that there was nothing to fear, since the tarantula was contained. Another group was encouraged to name their honest feelings about being in proximity to a tarantula. A week later they conducted the outdoor experiment again, measuring responses as the participants approached the free roaming arachnid. As it turned out, the group that had named their feelings did much better in approaching the spider, while those who had expressed a confidence that they hadn't felt were no better off.³

BEYOND DELIVERANCE

³ Miller, Michael. That tarantula is terrifying. Retrieved at <https://www.6seconds.org/2018/01/21/getting-unstuck-power-naming-emotions/>

How can this neurological reality help us as seasons of uncertainty loom large? We turn again to David, who declared: *This poor man called and the Lord heard him and saved him out of all his troubles.* As a man after God's own heart, David was accustomed to calling out to God in times of trouble. But his experience here might show us something else. The Hebrew word for *called* is often translated *named*, a term we see throughout the creation narrative. For example, "God *called* the light "day," and the darkness he *called* "night," or God brought the animals to Adam and "whatever the man *called* each living creature, that was its name." (Genesis 1:5, 2:19). It appears that David didn't simply raise up a generic cry for help but took the time to name the things that were troubling him.

And the Lord heard him... It almost feels as if David knew that God was hovering nearby, waiting for him to identify his needs, listening as he named them one by one. If neuroscientists are right, then the God who created the billions of neurons in our brains understands the power in our naming our concerns and the well-being that we experience when our feelings and thoughts come together. To that end, he urges us to call upon him, to pray, to petition, to cry out—all ways for us to describe the distress we may or may not realize is churning within.

CONCLUSION

In seasons of uncertainty like a global pandemic on our doorstep, we can be prone to look for answers in the cacophony of voices that tell us what to do, or how to feel, or what the future holds. But at some point, we begin to see that their words don't relieve our stress, and, may in fact exacerbate it. Instead, what we need is to pull away and quiet our hearts, to come to God in poverty of spirit and take the time to name the feelings showing up in our knotted shoulders or swirling stomachs or angry outbursts or sleepless hours or chewed up fingernails. Our heavenly Father is listening, waiting, ready to save us once again from all our troubles.

Reflect

Do you find it natural to name the things that trouble you in prayer? Why or why not? What might be the benefits of taking the time to identify your feelings verbally?

Share

How can we help others—our spouses, friends, children, parents—to call upon God in this way—by naming their negative emotions, while still affirming his goodness and power?

Practice

Today as you feel any level of distress—from irritation at another driver to anger with your kids to disappointment with a friend—pause and identify what you are experiencing. See yourself naming this in God’s presence, then thank him for bringing your mind and heart together to bring about deliverance.

LESSON FOUR: EXPERIENCING THE DEPTHS

SCRIPTURE:

Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him. Fear the Lord, you his holy people, for those who fear him lack nothing. The lions may grow weak and hungry, but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing. Psalm 34:8-10

INTRODUCTION

Madame Jeanne Marie de la Mothe Guyon, a French aristocrat born in 1648, began her relationship with Jesus as a teenage girl. From the start, Guyon hungered for God, and pursued every avenue she could to know him more deeply. Although literate, she was not allowed to own a Bible, so she memorized as much as she could by attending mass. Over the course of her life, she would write some 40 volumes, many of which have been translated into dozens of languages that to this day continue to impact people of faith and lead them on their spiritual journeys.

In her most popular book now titled *Experiencing the Depths of Jesus Christ*, Madame Guyon lays out her plan for encountering and developing intimacy with Christ through the pages of Scripture. Early on she admonishes the reader:

If you read quickly, it will benefit you little," Guyon cautions. "You will be like a bee that merely skims the surface of a flower. Instead, in this new way of reading with prayer, you must become as the bee who penetrates into the depths of the flower. You plunge deeply within to remove its deepest nectar.⁴

TASTE AND SEE

David's invitation to *taste and see that the Lord is good* in Psalm 34 echoes Guyon's call to experience God in a tangible way, to press into his presence as if savoring the flavors of some choice food, or to gaze upon him until his goodness saturates our souls.

Perhaps the most powerful thing about this simple verse is the context in which it was penned. As we've noted each lesson, David wrote this from a place of uncertainty, in a time when he'd experienced deliverance from one enemy, but remained holed up, hiding from Saul and away from the country where by all rights he should have been king. He had nothing but the

⁴ Guyon, Jeanne Marie Bouvier de La Motte. 1975. *Experiencing the depths of Jesus Christ*, p. 8.

promises of God to cling to, and his circumstances seemed to be in direct opposition to those.

OUR HOPE IN STRUGGLE

We can trust David's affirmation that our happiness lies in finding God as our refuge through seasons of uncertainty. For him, tasting and seeing God was not some lofty truth or spiritual platitude, but the reality of a relationship that had been forged through pain and strengthened through struggle. He knew whereof he spoke.

Madame Guyon, who often pleads with her readers to press into the wonder of experiencing God, was also no stranger to suffering. Not only did she face numerous personal tragedies and losses, but as time went on, her spiritual influence became so threatening to the official church that they convicted her of heresy and insubordination and sent her to the bastille, a prison infamous for its terrifying treatment. From there she penned these words:

Oh poor creatures, who pass your time in feeding upon the gifts of God, and think therein to be the most favored and happy. How I pity you if you stop here, short of the true rest, and cease to go forward to God Himself, through the loss of those cherished gifts which you now delight in.⁵

CONCLUSION

Jesus once explained that eternal life is summed up in one thing—knowing him. This is what we are made for, and why he gave his life—so that growing day by day in intimacy with him would be the driving force in our lives. The psalmist David and Madame Guyon and hundreds of other saints who've gone before us testify that living with uncertainty and the losses it often brings, is incredible soil for the roots of our relationship with God to go deep. These are the times, they tell us, when we can truly find refuge in God as we taste and see how good he is.

Reflect

What experiences or seasons in your life have taught you to taste of God's goodness or to find refuge in him? What does the idea that God is calling you to know him more through this season of uncertainty bring up for you? How do you respond?

⁵ Guyon, Jeanne, *Madame Guyon: An Autobiography* (Chicago: Moody Press), p. 194.

Share

What are some ways you can help each other press into God's presence more through this season? What stories encourage you most?

Practice

Madame Guyon offers a simple way to experience God's presence as you read Scripture. She suggests reading slowly, and as you feel a pause in your spirit, stop and wait on God, pondering the words, asking for revelation, while remembering that Jesus is with you and in you to speak and draw you to himself. When you feel you've made a heart connection with a word or phrase in the passage, then you move on using this simple method until you finish. Read Psalm 34:8-10 using this method. Take your time and slow everything down so that you can meet God through His Word.

LESSON FIVE: PURSUING PEACE

SCRIPTURE

Come, my children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord. Whoever of you loves life and desires to see many good days, keep your tongue from evil and your lips from telling lies. Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it. Psalm 34:11-14

INTRODUCTION

When the virus that came to be known as COVID-19 exploded on the global stage, experts were initially at a loss about how to contain it. Nothing had prepared them for this *novel virus* that had never been seen in human beings before. The outbreak initiated in Wuhan, China at the end of 2019 with unusual numbers of people having pneumonia-like symptoms, but serious action wasn't taken until January 23, when authorities shut down the entire area, including flights, trains, subways, buses and ferries. No one was allowed in or out. It was only a matter of time before countries all over the world were forced to impose similar measures. As the death toll rose globally, more and more people were encouraged or mandated to self-isolate as everything except essential businesses were shut down.

No one knew how far the virus would spread, how long it might take to contain it, or even what their chances of contracting it might be. To that end, *shelter-in-place* laws left people feeling disconnected, confused, stressed and fearful. The question that hung like a shroud as change and uncertainty became the norm, was, *what are we going to do?*

A SIMPLE PLAN

In many ways, David and those who'd joined him shared a similar fate, sheltering-in-place far from home, with no idea of what was to come or how long they would be forced to embrace this season of uncertainty. But he shares some tips on how to live that are as timely today as they were then. For those of us feeling paralyzed by upheaval or wondering what in the world we are going to do, David gently guides us in four simple steps.

STEP ONE: FEAR THE LORD

Just as he began this Psalm, David calls us back to the one unchanging reality—God who is sovereign over all things. To fear the Lord is to honor this truth, to prayerfully affirm that although relentless change is our new normal, God is still in control. Though we may not understand what is happening or

why, we find a needed respite from the crashing waves of uncertainty in God's immutable nature.

STEP DO: TURN FROM EVIL

The word *evil* probably brings up notions of things that are vile or abhorrent for most of us, but this word is much broader, encompassing anything unpleasant, disagreeable, distressing, unkind or hurtful. This may explain why David first exhorts us to keep our tongues from evil. There is power in the words we speak, and never is this more keenly felt than when communities are in crisis. Inevitably conversations become platforms to repeat negative news, nitpick leaders, spew discontent, criticize decision-makers or spit out caustic complaints. Soon, evil descends like a dark cloud over the very atmosphere. David warns us to turn our backs on this kind of thing, to refuse to partner with it. Experiencing the good in each day and loving the life we have hangs in the balance if we don't.

STEP THREE: DO GOOD

Do good. Our mandate couldn't be clearer, and yet this doesn't always come naturally in seasons of uncertainty. We can so easily find ourselves shrinking back, folding into the narrowness of our own needs, giving into fear that makes us pull away instead of love that opens our hearts wide to those in need. To that end, we can set an intention to prayerfully ask throughout the day, *what good can I do?* Even the smallest act of kindness can bring hope to those whose lives we touch, and enhance the environment in our homes and neighborhoods and cities.

STEP FOUR: SEEK AND PURSUE PEACE

Shalom is a beautiful concept that echoes from the pages of God's Word. It is both an attribute of God and a grace he gives that encompasses wholeness and tranquility, prosperity and security. It is not surprising that David, whose life had been upended by war for years, would encourage us not only to seek the shalom of God, but to pursue it, to run after it with all that is within us.

In seasons of uncertainty, the shalom of God is life-giving and may be the one thing that offers relief from the strain of disruption we face daily. From this place, God calls us to lift our eyes to those around us who are broken by bitterness, overwhelmed by strife and gutted by turmoil.

As dwelling places of God's Spirit, we carry shalom in our very beings. We are ambassadors of a kingdom that is not of this world. We hear our King whisper to our souls: *Peace I leave with you, my peace I give you,* and we know once again our blessed call to spread shalom in his name.

Reflect

How do you respond to the idea of trusting in God's sovereignty through this season? What does David's exhortation to seek and pursue peace mean for you? As you consider the uncertainty in your life, what might pursuing peace look like for you?

Share

Which of the four steps David offers—fear the Lord, turn from evil, do good and pursue peace—is most needed in your community right now? Why?

Practice

Spend some time in prayer for those in your sphere of influence—at home and in your nearby community. With the Spirit's help, make a list of simple acts of kindness you can do to bless others. Set clear intentions and specific plans as to when and how you will take action on these.